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*The Opposition between the Gospel of
Jesus Christ and what is called the
Religion of Nature.*

A *log 2 e 7*
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S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,
AT ST MARY'S,

ON
SUNDAY, 1 JULY M.DCC.LIX.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE reader will immediately perceive, that the following attempt is addressed to those only, who “believe that Jesus is the Son of God,” and who look for everlasting life thro’ a right faith in his name.

Such persons, it is humbly presumed, will, upon mature attention to the considerations here placed before them, be induced to admit the absurdity of those assertions, which began to gain credit in this nation, about the time of archbishop Tillotson, “That what is called Natural Religion is a foundation to the reception, an help to the efficacy, of the gospel of salvation.” Assertions which have long seemed to the author to derogate from the importance of the word of God, and to give to those who affect to exalt this unascertained, this imaginary code of natural law, such advantages in their reasonings against the word of God, as no efforts which have been used for explaining and qualifying these assertions, have been able effectually to wrest from them.

With those who deny the supposition on which the following reasonings proceed, that of the divine authority of the holy scriptures, grounding their objections upon certain imaginations which they weakly represent as the remonstrances of reason, with such persons the author, however unfashionable his opinion may be, conceiveth it absurd for a christian to maintain any controversy, except such as may tend to lay before them the miraculous evidences of that WORD, which when its divine authority is once established will of itself evince, because it asserteth, its own necessity and sufficiency for the great purpose of human salvation; and consequently, the vanity as well as the great impiety of “every reasoning which exalteth itself against the knowledge of God”, such as “the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, hath declared him”.

COLOSS. II. 8.

BEWARE LEST ANY MAN SPOIL YOU,
THRO' PHILOSOPHY AND VAIN DE-
CEIT, AFTER THE TRADITION OF
MEN, AFTER THE RUDIMENTS OF
THE WORLD, AND NOT AFTER
CHRIST.

ST. *Paul* had been, by miraculous de-
signation, separated as a preacher of
that great mystery of man's redemp-
tion, whose peculiar circumstances had
been hid from ages and from generations,
and which, tho' God had expressly taught
mankind to trust in and depend upon it, as
the only means of their eternal happiness,
could not be known in its whole display, till
it should in the fulness of time, be laid open
by the incarnation, and life, and sacrifice, and
resurrection, and ascension of the God-son, the
second person of the blessed, glorious, co-
equal trinity.

THE purpose and grace of salvation in Christ
Jesus was, as the apostle informeth us in his
second epistle to *Timothy*, given us before the
world began; but the mystery of this salva-

tion of mankind which, as he elsewhere affirmeth, was kept secret 'till the coming of Jesus Christ, was made *manifest* only by his *appearing*, who abolished death, (the eternal damnation which, without his coming, would have passed upon all men) and brought to light, displayed in its whole arrangement, by means of the gospel, that life and immortality, that eternal salvation which he purchased for us.

THIS dispensation, so entirely the work of God's own secret purpose, adjusting it to the real exigency and fitness of things, was not, as the apostle well knew, examinable by any principles of human science, by any surmises of human reason; but he knew also the busy, intrusive spirit of philosophy, which had begun, no doubt, in the rich and populous city of *Colossæ*, as well as he had known it at *Athens*, to dogmatize upon this new-started subject, as it was wont to do upon every possible question relating to God or man. And, studious to prevent the fatal impressions which might be made on the disciples of Jesus Christ if they should listen to what He stilerth the *παραβολαί**, the specious reasonings of those, who like some absurd adventurers in our days, could, upon their own arbitrarily assumed, or weakly established principles, demonstrate any conceit which their imagination

* Colof. ii. 3, 4. In whom [Christ] are hid all the Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge. And this I say lest any Man should beguile you with enticing Words—*οὐ μὴ τις υμᾶς ΠΑΡΑΒΟΛΙΖΗΤΑΙ ΕΝ ΗΓΓΑΝΟΛΟΓΙΑ.*

suggested, he annexeth to the heavenly doctrine a caution, against that which was most likely to frustrate the influence of it. — Having rooted, built up, established^b their faith upon the steadfast ground of that gospel-evidence on which the divine wisdom hath rested it, he directeth his *Colossians* still to set before them CHRIST the redeemer, him in whom dwelleth bodily all the fulness of the GODHEAD, even “Christ crucified,” as the fundamental article, the standard of a christian’s religious knowledge. Every high thought, every vain reasoning, which rebelleth against him, must be subdued, and led captive after his triumphant banner. All the proud, pretended demonstrations of philosophy, all the pompous traditions of men, all the elements of the world, however they may vaunt themselves as the unfailing criteria of truth and science, must still submit themselves to the examen of his doctrine who is the truth itself; who was declared to be the Son of God with power by that divine Spirit whereby he raised his human body from the dead.

ALL who come unto us as teachers of divine or moral lessons which are not *after him*, must be looked upon as thieves and robbers, whose errand is to spoil, to plunder us of the *καλή περιουσίαν*, the precious depositum, on the watchful custody whereof dependeth our hope of eternal glory.

^b ἐρριζωμένοι, καὶ ἐπεσφραγισμένοι ἐν αὐτῷ, καὶ βεβαιωμένοι ἐν τῇ πίστι. Colof. ii. 7.

“BEWARE lest any man spoil you, thro’ philosophy, and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”

THE whole passage evidently confineth its caution to *philosophy*, nor can the apostle be supposed, without grossly violating the propriety of language, to allude, in this place, as many have supposed him to allude, to *Jewish* traditions, and the worshipping of angels, which are other distinct subjects of caution occurring in the progress of this epistle^a.

MUCH needless labour hath been employed by commentators for ascertaining that particular species of the philosophies then in repute, which St. *Paul* meant here to censure. His character of it is too general, to admit, naturally, of any appropriation.

WE must therefore conclude that he intended none, but that his charge was meant to involve every philosophic school, as, indeed, there is not one of them that could pretend that it stood clear of it. All abounded with vain deceit, all stood upon the authority of men, all rested upon principles taken from, and terminating in this world, and for all these reasons, none of them were *after Christ*.

BUT, tho’ every discipline or sect of the ancient philosophy stood alike in opposition to the doctrine of Christ, we must by no

^a From the 16th verse of this 2d chap. to the end of it.

means fix this imputation upon every *part* or *branch* of philosophy.

WHATEVER hath any meaning in this profession, may be divided into three parts, the consideration of body and its attributes, and of spirit and its attributes, and lastly the instrumental art of logic or dialectic, whose province is to guide and direct the mind in her researches after truth.

THE first of these, was not likely to exert any unfavourable influence on the success of the gospel. The pursuit of what is now termed natural philosophy, attending to the motions and properties of corporeal nature, might proceed rightly or mistakenly in its enquiries; doing service to social life in its useful discoveries, and guiltless of moral harm in its aberrations from truth. And tho' these latter times have, by the diligent cultivation of experiment, arrived at the knowledge of many important arts, unknown or imperfectly known to the ancients, it is not to be doubted, but that they also had deduced valuable improvements, which never came down to us, from their acknowledged proficiency in geometrical knowledge: And if we reflect only on the magic wonders which are related of *Archimedes* his art, it may seem no unreasonable supposition that many of our modern discoveries, relating to mechanic powers, and the doctrine of light, are such as had made their appearance, and had even flourished in earlier ages, till the rising reputation of other
modes

modes of learning eclipsed, or the tide of succeeding ignorance overwhelmed them.

As little can the art of logic or dialectic be suspected of diserving the interests of the Gospel of Christ, or of plundering its professors of their invaluable possession. The instrumental art of reasoning, as taught anciently in the school of its great master, *Aristotle*, and recommended by the institutions of this excellent university, is a system of such rules and principles as, being clearly understood and rightly attended to, will afford the most effectual assistance for the discovery of truth where it is discoverable; for checking our pursuit after such knowledge as is unattainable; for ascertaining the measures of that assent which is due to propositions probable in different degrees; and for curing or at least exposing the presumption, as well of those who undertake to censure the ways of God revealed to man, as of those who give countenance to sceptical and endless examinations of doctrines which stand altogether upon divine authority, by attempting to explain and justify them upon plans of divine rectitude formed by visionary conjecture.

THE syllogistic method of ratiocination, assisted by the rules of logic for adjusting our apprehensions with precision, is so severe a ballance, that no counterfeit can stand before it; and it is no wonder that they who are not contented with that compass of knowledge to which God hath confined us in this

state

state of things, but pant after the honour of being thought discoverers in human nature and the agency of God, it is no wonder that such persons should constantly affect to discharge their pleasantry against the formal method of argumentation, and to introduce that more loose procedure, which doth not so nicely and rigidly examine assertions in all their parts, but will suffer many confident propositions to pass unquestioned which, where guard is better kept, would regularly be demanded, perhaps in vain, to give a good account of themselves.

It remaineth then, that our apostle's charge against philosophy must be confined to that branch of it which hath spirit for its subject, and professeth to set forth the nature, and attributes, and agency, and rectitude of God, and of the human soul.

It was with this sort of philosophy that the ancient, learned world most abounded. Whatever else were the subject of a philosopher's enquiries, the nature of the gods and the nature of man was generally sure to make a part of them. And he who was ambitious, as most of them were, of being a leader in opinion, took care always to advance some notion upon these subjects, altogether his own. And indeed, where the controul of a decisive authority was wanting, and all was imagination and conjecture, which could plausibly be supported by a little ingenious *παιωνολογια*, each philoso-

philosopher had certainly a right to set up for himself.

WHAT their success was, may be seen compendiously in a few of *Cicero's* treatises, where most of their notions are detailed concerning the nature of the gods, the soul of man, his duty, and his supreme good.

THAT all their disagreeing doctrines on these subjects were not the dictates of the same right reason, the voice of that truth to which they all alike pretended, we may, without trying them by the ballance of the sanctuary, be as certain, as that the same right line cannot flow in several directions. But when we bring them to *that* ballance, the unerring word of GOD, the criterion of all divine and moral truth, they will all be found to be altogether deceitful upon the weights, and lighter than vanity itself.

LET us, however, at the same time acknowledge, that many sentiments blaze forth in the writings and sayings of some of them, worthy of that divine spirit by which all religious truth is dictated, many noble, and let me call them christian apophthegms. For nothing is true in theology or morality but what retaineth to Jesus Christ; to him who is the only source of an eternal life, a blissful immortality to all who shall enjoy it among the sons of *Adam*; to him who is all, and in all; whose redeeming efficacy was offered to the faith of the first fallen, human creatures, and

and hath, all along, uniformly operated for the salvation of all those, who, in any age of the world, have earnestly addressed themselves to the application of those means, thro' which, by divine appointment, the help of this Redeemer is to be obtained.

THESE noble truths, I say, which lie scattered thro' the writings and sayings of the heathen sages, can be traced to no other fountain than that from whence issueth all divine, all moral truth. The family of *Noah* were, as an apostle informeth us, preachers, for the patriarch is stiled the eighth preacher, * of righteousness; certainly of no other righteousness (because there hath been no other since the fall of man,) than that which was by faith in the seed of the woman, the Redeemer who should come into the world; and of that family was the whole earth overspread with inhabitants, who retained for a long time, no doubt, amidst their growing corruptions, many strong traces of the lessons of those heaven-instructed preachers, delivered down thro' successive generations. And it is to these lessons that we are to ascribe all those sublime effata, relating to God, or to a morality carried beyond this world, which occur, tho' rarely enough, in heathen writers. And if many ridiculous, many monstrous absurdities do likewise occur there, we are to attribute these to the wanton fancies, the rash efforts of uninstructed human reason; ever successful in her deduc-

a 2 Pet. ii. 5. οὐδὲν Νῶε διδασκωνος κηρυγς.

tions when properly and sufficiently informed concerning her subject, but sure to be the dupe of vanity and error, when, trusting to abstract notions, formed by herself, of things not seen, of things invisible, she presumeth to decide concerning them with a confidence which could only be warranted by the completest, revealed knowledge of their whole nature and circumstances.

WHAT wonder is it, then, if these busy wits, conducting their reasonings, each according to a sett of principles, the creatures of his own imagination, erected systems so widely disagreeing with each other? What wonder, if, committing themselves, each to his own reason, the plausible guide which confidently undertook to lead them surely thro' regions altogether unknown to her, they fell so lamentably short of the character which they assumed, of professors of wisdom; if their laboured conclusions relating to the one uncreated, as well as to created spirits, deserved the title of "prophane and old wives fables;" if they fell under that just reproach, "that there was nothing so absurd which had not been maintained by some of the philosophers;" if, in a word, they merited the still more disparaging reprehension of *St. Paul*, "that they became vain in their reasonings, and their heart," (the true seat of all religious knowledge,) "was darkened, and infatuated;" and that "they dropped into fools thro' the very profession of wisdom:" while
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all their intenseness of reasoning, all their noble elevation of thought led them, after all, "to change the glory of the incorruptible God, into an image made like unto corruptible man, and to birds and four footed beasts and creeping things?" Extravagancies which might move our laughter, were it not for the mournful consequences which resulted from them, that shocking moral conduct, detailed by the apostle to the *Romans*^a, to which the just dereliction of God had abandoned these wise teachers, with all the world their wilfully blind followers, "who had changed his truth into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature instead of the Creator who is over all, God blessed for ever, Amen!"

It may, perhaps, be pleaded in defence of the character of these wise men, that St. *Paul's* account can agree with only a few of them: that there were many who cultivated a more refined theology, and heartily exploded the popular errors of their times: that *Socrates* died a martyr to the cause of the true God, in opposition to the wretched fables which deformed the religion of his countrymen; that the christian world is indebted to *Aristotle* and *Cicero* for such exquisite systems of morality as the most zealous professors of the gospel must highly applaud.

SUCH magnificent things have indeed been spoken of these admired wits of antiquity; but

^a Rom. chap. 1.

this compliment to *Socrates* is made by such as have surely forgotten the ridiculous vow^a paid to *Æsculapius* with the dying breath of this philosopher, as well as the express apology which he is, by the grave, authentic *Xenophon* recorded to have offered, in answer to the charge of his rejecting the gods of his country. Had his heart been, indeed, turned from these idols to serve the living GOD, is it conceivable that the intrepid *Socrates*, he who met his death so calmly, who even refused to accept of the deliverance which was projected for him, would have prevaricated on this great occasion; that he would peremptorily have denied a charge in which, if it had been true, he must have gloried, and would even have appealed to facts for proving the falsehood of it, for proving himself a genuine idolater? "I cannot but wonder," said he, "on what authority I am accused as not acknowledging the divinity of the gods of my country; when I have been seen by others, and might have been seen by my accuser, if he had been pleased to observe me, performing sacrifices at the public festivals and upon the common altars^b."

COULD a conscientious worshipper of the true GOD have made a defence like this? and may it not be justly objected to our philosopher, that if he knew GOD, he honoured him not

^a Ω Κριτων, εφη, τη Ασληπιω οφειλομεν αλκισθηναι, ουδω απο-
δει, καμ μη αμολησθαι. Plat. Phæd. sub fin.

^b See *Xenoph.* Apol. Socrat.

as God, when he did not think fit to use an opportunity the most favourable of all others for avowing a zealous attachment to the honour of *His* eternal power and godhead? Let the heroick courage of that noble army of martyrs “who were slain for the word of God and for “the testimony of Jesus,” be compared with the conduct of the philosopher in this part of his apology, and his most sanguine admirers will be compelled to acknowledge, either that he had all along sacrificed, not for form, but in good earnest, to the rabble of his country-gods, and indeed knew nothing of the God of heaven; or that he, contemptuously, and without any impulse of fear, deserted his faith, and merited, not so much the stile of a martyr, as of a wanton, double-minded, unstable apostate.

WHEN, therefore, according to a promise which hath been made us^a, the life of this great man shall be published, as a supplement

^a In the preface of a book lately printed, entitled, *Sacred Exercises*; compiled for the use of places of education, particularly *Westminster School*.

As it is to be presumed that our youth are at that school early and diligently instructed in the great fundamental truths of the gospel, it is the less to be lamented that the modest, and, I believe, well-meaning compiler of these exercises hath left out those doctrines which ought otherwise to have preceded the excellent lessons which he hath extracted from the holy scriptures, concerning beneficence, and piety and its everlasting rewards; the doctrines, I mean, of eternal redemption thro’ the sacrifice of the Son of God, and of the necessity of faith and affiance in him, and of sanctification by the holy spirit, that we may be enabled to follow the steps of the great exemplar whom he hath proposed to our imitation.

to that of our blessed Redeemer, for the moral instruction of one of our great schools, we cannot but wish, as well for the honour of *Socrates*, as for the sake of pure and undefiled religion, that these particulars of his story, as well as his lively dialogue (recorded by *Xenophon*) with a common *Athenian* prostitute, on the subject of the arts of engaging the affections of her lovers, will be kept out of sight.

WITH regard to the ethicks of *Aristotle* and the offices of *Cicero*, we must admit that they have long been in possession of an uncommon degree of esteem; that they have been recommended as a proper apparatus to christian theology, and that a competent acquaintance with the stile and language of the latter of them, hath sometimes been admitted, without other examination, as a passport for admission to the ministry in the christian church; as the former hath filled the honourable post of introducing youth, throughout the christian world, to the study of that moral philosophy which hath been recommended, chiefly by the authority of the great lord *Bacon*, as a necessary handmaid to the wholesome doctrine of the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

BUT let us not compliment these masterly performances at the expence of truth, which we shall not fail to do if we suppose their authors extended their design beyond the well ordering and polishing of civil, social life and manners. Neither of them appeareth to have a thought concerning the influence of the moral

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ral conduct they have prescribed, on any future state of existence; neither of them hath represented morality as being at all concerned with or influenced by the fear or the love, even of such gods as heathen theology hath placed in heaven, much less of him whom his holy word hath pronounced to be a consuming fire to those who despise him, and an everlasting rewarder of all those who love and diligently seek him.

THE plan of *Aristotle* is professedly to direct us to the attainment of the "supreme good of man;" and that supreme good is, according to him, neither more nor less than the most perfect happiness or enjoyment, which is to be found within the compass of our threescore years and ten; or, as the detailers of his ethicks have defined it, *summa felicitas quæ in hac vitâ potest obtineri!*

THE duties or offices set forth by the *Roman* philosopher are such as seem to him to result from certain tastes and dispositions which he supposeth nature to have implanted in the soul of man. And tho' his treatise abound with many fine sentiments, many of those moral lessons which are "contained in the law;" yet doth he appear to be utterly ignorant of any consequences, beyond this life, of the observance or violation of the duties which he hath delineated; nay, he hath implicitly denied any such consequences, in asserting, that the obligation which lay on *Regulus* to perform the tenor of his oath, did not arise from

from the apprehension of the fabulous wrath of *Jupiter*, against perjury; “ whose heaviest “ wrath could not,” saith he, “ have inflicted “ greater evil on *Regulus*, for the violation of “ his oath, than this hero inflicted on himself “ by performing it.” How utterly doth this doctrine stand opposite to that of the Saviour of the world, who said, “ fear not them who “ can kill the body, and after this have no “ more that they can do, but fear him who “ after he hath killed, hath power to destroy “ both soul and body in hell, yea, I say unto “ you, fear him.” How utterly opposite, indeed, are the whole systems of both the philosophers to the divine sermons of him “ who “ spake as never man spake;” who undertook to guide mankind not to an earthly, but to an heavenly happiness, and whose thoughts consequently, as the heaven is higher than the earth, were higher than their thoughts. And it cannot but seem strange that a morality, calculated, as theirs professedly was, for the shortlived interests of this present world, should be thought so serviceable as it hath been sometimes pretended, to the studies of those, whose profession is to recommend that love of God which is at enmity with the friendship and love of this world, and, by the dictates of the all-sufficient, sacred volume, and the ordinances of the apostolic church of Christ, to frame mankind for the everduring society of saints and angels in the beatific presence of God, thro’ that holy spirit, promised to our
earnest

earnest desires, whose genuine fruits exceed the most exalted delineations of the most admired heathen morality: The fruits, I mean, enumerated by our apostle, that love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, which are the sure, the only means of private, as well as social felicity in this world, because the sure, the only earnest of the blessedness which awaiteth the sons of God in that which is to come.

STILL, let the ancient moralists be studied with attention. Some of them will supply us with the fairest examples of elegant composition and the graces of writing, so important to every learned profession: All will advance our knowledge in that which maketh an useful part in a scholar's researches, "the history of opinions;" but let it be our main view in reading them, not, from their pages to fill up, as if any thing were wanting to, that christian morality which was written in mount *Sinai* by the finger of God, and whose true spirit and large extent was so nobly set forth

a Dr. *Donne*, speaking of some daring offenders in his time hath characterized them in these lines,

Whose strange sins Canonists could hardly tell
In which commandment's large receipt they dwell.

And a certain writer hath thus commented upon them, "A just ridicule" (tho' the plain reader will be puzzled to find it) "on those practical commentators, as they are called, who include all moral and religious duties within the decalogue, whereas their true original sense is much more confined; being a short summary" (their original sense being a short summary!) "of moral duty, fitted for a single people upon a particular occasion, and to serve transitory ends." Whatever may become of the

on another mount in the authoritative, awakening sermon of the blessed Jesus ; but rather, to mark the miserable errors of the most admired examples of mere human wisdom, and to advance our thankfulness to the great author of every good and perfect gift, who hath called us out of their darkness into his marvellous light, teaching us, by his unerring word, what is his good, and acceptable, and perfect will.

WE have now taken a passing view of the genius of that moral, and if we may so call it, that pneumatic philosophy which flourished in the world before and at the incarnation and crucifixion of the Son of God ; and of the aspect which it bore towards the doctrine of the cross. We have seen, that it pretended to penetrate into the essential proprieties and necessities of things, and that each leading philosopher had erected a system of moral and theological notions upon his own supposed clear view of these proprieties and necessities, tho' he had, in truth, little other view of them than

grammar of this curious passage, the meaning of it is obvious enough, and no christian, who hath considered the *matter* of the ten commandments, will hear without astonishment, that the writer who hath thus confined their injunctions and prohibitions to a single people, a particular occasion, and transitory ends, is a clergyman of the church of *England*, till he is told that it is the same person who hath asserted, thro' several large volumes, in opposition to the express declarations of our blessed Saviour and *St. Paul*, that God, who prepared the happiness of an everlasting life thro' Jesus Christ for all mankind, before the world began, did purposely conceal the knowledge of it from his chosen, favourite people, while he was governing them by an immediate, miraculous superintendency ! See *Warburton's Edit. of Pope*.

such as was presented to him by comparing together ideas, the shadowy chimera's of his own imagination. We have seen that, consequently, it was but natural that such philosophers should deride a system of doctrines founded on an unthought of fallen state of human nature, and addressed to men's acceptance chiefly by an appeal to the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ crucified, a fact exploded by the essential principles of their several philosophies, and should dismiss it with the appellation of *foolishness*, especially, as it affected not to support itself by any of that abstract argumentation which with them passed for wisdom.

AND if we carry our view onward to the æra of successful christianity, we shall find, that tho' the wisdom of God did not suffer the wisdom of this world to prevail against the establishment of his church, yet did it not seem good to him entirely to silence this enemy of the cross of Christ. Philosophy still continued to stretch forth her hand to vex the church, and every one hath heard of the brand which *Tertullian* fixed upon her in this respect, pronouncing her to be the fruitful mother of those heresies which are permitted amongst christians, that they who are approved of God, as receiving the ingrafted word with the meekness of little children, may be made manifest, and distinguished from those who, ignorant of his righteousness, and going about to establish their own wisdom and righteousness, have not submitted

mitted themselves to the wisdom and righteousness of God.

AND such as it hath been formerly, such will ever be the tendency of ideal philosophy with regard to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The whole process of that gospel is founded upon, and conducted according to certain facts or events, communicated to us only by the divine history; and therefore the most closely-reasoned philosophy, not attending to those facts, nor acquainted with the effects and consequences of them, but guided by a certain abstract contemplation of the little which it seeth and knoweth of man's nature and history, will not only not prescribe what the gospel prescribeth, but will necessarily fall into a system opposite to it, if at any time it undertake to dictate in matters of religion.

THE caution therefore of our apostle should still sound in our ears, still keep us on our guard against the plausible reasonings of human doctrine and tradition, which are not after Christ. And it will not, I trust, be unreasonable to enquire, whether there is not, in our days, a fashionable philosophy which answereth to the characteristicks set forth in our text; that, if there be, ye may, on this authority, advise yourselves to beware of it, as threatening to plunder you of your christian faith, and its exceeding great reward.

AND if we follow the three-fold division of philosophy at first laid down, the suspicion will
fall,

fall, if any where, upon that branch of it, which undertaketh, without any recourse had to the sacred volume, to investigate the nature and attributes of God, and the nature and duties of man, from certain notions of fitness and exigency, deduced from a supposed plain and obvious constitution of things.

IF this admired way of speculation shall appear, in any degree to have the dangerous tendency abovementioned, this audience will need no other caution to beware of it; if, on the contrary, that which is stiled *natural religion* be, indeed, united with the gospel in an harmonious league, we must then acknowledge that it is by no means beside the proper business of christian theology, to pursue a plan which hath by some been looked upon as the consummation of it, the endeavouring to trace out the lines of this natural religion, and to demonstrate its connexion with the gospel of Jesus Christ, modernly denominated revealed religion.

I SHALL only premise, that the present enquiry is not, in the least degree, affected by the case of the heathen world. The law which guided the few virtuous heathen is no where upon record, nor can be pronounced to be the same with any of those many systems of natural religion which this age hath produced. St. Paul hath expressly informed us, "that the Gentiles who had not the written law, were, by doing the things contained in that law, a law unto themselves;" the moral law, therefore,

fore, of those heathens who sometimes acted virtuously, was, as it should seem, the very law of *Moses*, communicated to them without writing, that is, traditionally. But, tho' we should suppose that God gave them no other instruction in religious concerns than that which their own reason and reflection suggested, it can by no means from thence be inferred, that they to whom the light of the gospel hath shined are at all referred to the same means of instruction that those heathens were. Since the Saviour of the world came into it, all men every where are required to repent, and believe, and stay themselves upon, the gospel. How it fared with the heathen before that period, is as little our concern, and indeed, as little investigable by human reason, uninformed, and contemplating only her own ideas on this subject, as how it may fare with the supposed inhabitants of the polar regions, and how they conduct the affairs of natural and civil life, during the half year's absence of the sun. We may frame ingenious guesses concerning these particulars, founded upon an imagined necessity and constitution of things, but our ignorance of them will be as real as theirs who make no guesses, unless it shall be cured by our own experience, or by authentic information.

AND in the mean time, it will be our comfort, that as the daily visits of the material sun render it unnecessary for us to enquire what expedients the polar inhabitants may have recourse

recourse to for supplying the long absences of this important luminary; so hath the present, uninterrupted influence of the sun of righteousness superseded the necessity of our having recourse, for our guidance in moral conduct, to that dim twilight of nature, by which the good heathens are supposed to have been guided.

WHENCE, then, hath it come to pass, that infidels have been able to exercise so great a number of christian writers upon certain trifling, useless questions relating to this supposed, or now, at least, antiquated law, or religion of nature? And who hath fascinated those who profess to maintain the sufficiency of the holy scriptures to salvation, to characterize that law or religion in such magnificent phrase, as may seem to exalt it even above the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; while they assert, that it is, in its obligation, " antecedent to the will of God himself; the first bond of civil society, a bond which," it seems, " no nation under heaven but our own will ever suffer to be called in question!" Its principles being " those *only* which can enforce obedience for conscience sake!" That in a word, it is the foundation of revelation, the test or standard whereby the truth of that is to be tried!

THIS law or religion of nature is generally understood to be that system of moral and re-

See the preface, p. 16, to the third letter on Ld. Bolingbroke's philosophic writings, (1st Ed.) supposed to be written by the author of D. L.

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religious notions, which is said to be so distinctly and clearly perceived and acknowledged, by the bare light of nature, as frequently to be stiled, upon the falsely supposed authority of *St. Paul*, “the law written in man’s heart,” a law eternal, unchangeable, founded in the very frame and constitution of things, and in those essential relations which man beareth to God and to his fellow creatures; and as such, magnified by infidels as setting aside the necessity and even the utility of the gospel; and acknowledged and called in by many christians as a necessary supplement to it, or rather supposed to be the primary law to which the gospel is supplemental!

BUT then, on the other hand, we are warranted by the authority of our excellent apostolical church, and of this renowned university, to neglect the prescript of this law as unnecessary; since, in the language of our articles, “the holy scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation;” and, in the language of our school of theology, the same “holy scripture is a perfect rule of faith and morals.”

AND if we must, upon such authorities, pronounce what is commonly stiled the law or religion of nature to be unnecessary to christians, we may presume it will be no offensive undertaking to examine briefly, as was proposed, the state and pretensions of this religion, (since we must call it so) and to enquire what conformity it may bear to the acknowledged truth of

of the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; that, if it shall appear not to be "after him," but after the tradition of men and the rudiments of the world, we may stand upon our guard against it, as retaining to that sort of philosophy and vain deceit of which our apostle hath cautioned us to beware.

LET me not be understood to call in question the propriety of that language which is so constantly used when the law or religion of nature is spoken of as arising from fitness, from reason, from congruity. The only question is whether a right method hath been used for tracing out this law. There is indisputably a certain condition and constitution of things to which, when known, it is fit, and reasonable, and congruous for man, it is his duty and happiness to conform his aims and actions. From the relation between the state of man and that constitution of things, certain truths which may be called a rule or law of his nature, do necessarily emerge. And where that state and that constitution, with the relation between them, are obvious and indisputable, there, it is not difficult to delineate the duties or proprieties of action which result from them. Thus if man be considered, merely as a rational creature of this world, which cannot subsist in it, without the help, good offices, joint-protection of his own species, nor without subjection to government, and accordingly findeth itself placed in a social state of subjection; the duties arising from such a state are

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easily ascertained ; --- if any difficulties arise concerning the measures of obedience to the governour of the society, they must be owing to different apprehensions concerning the original frame and constitution of government, which, as some may conceive, ought to be determined by abstract reasonings on their own idea of natural liberty, while others may think they bid fairest for truth by judging of the nature of government from the expresse appointment of him, who having framed and constituted man's nature, and knowing the propensities and weaknesses introduced into it by sin, hath enjoined such an obedience as he saw to be most suitable and congruous to the real, and, to him perfectly known, frame and constitution of things.

AGAIN, if you consider man with respect to any of his other relations in this world, as a father, son, master, servant ; let but the frame and constitution of those things on which these relations are founded, be clearly known, and you will not be at a loss to assign the duties or proprieties of behaviour belonging to each of these characters.

EXTEND your view, and contemplate the human being as standing in a state of relation to the most high God ; --- is it not most evident that if any of us mistake in estimating the religious duty of man, arising from this relation, it must be because he conceiveth wrongly, either concerning the nature and condition of one or both these beings so related,

lated, or concerning the real circumstances of the relation subsisting between them. The true religion of man will be that frame of mind, that course of behaviour which resulteth from the true state of those natures, and of the relation between them. And he alone will truly define the duties of this religion, to whom that true state of things is perfectly known. A difference of opinion with regard to that, will suggest systems of religion, utterly different from each other, and is, indeed, the true cause of all the ridiculous variety of conceits which may be noted among philosophers, ancient and modern, on the subject of religion and morality. The law or religion of nature will to *Epicurus* be one thing, another to *Zeno*, and still another to a modern deist. All of them will alike insist that this law is eternal, unchangeable, resulting from the frame and constitution of things, and the relation of man to other beings; but this assertion will no more settle the precise and true law of nature, than it would settle the true cause of electricity, for instance, if each of the philosophers who have attempted to assign that cause, should assert it to be eternal, unchangeable, resulting from the nature and constitution of fire, and the relation which it beareth to other bodies round it. Still the importunate questions will recur, what is this frame and constitution of things? this nature of fire? what is this relation of man to other beings, this relation of fire to other bodies? it is but too evident that

all the disagreement in the theories of these pretended secretaries of moral and physical nature, ariseth from their ignorance of the true nature and constitution of things. Each philosopher hath indeed his conjecture concerning them, but while no one of them hath authority to set aside the rest, no one of their systems, however confidently advanced, can be depended upon.

AND, in effect, we are able to pronounce upon the best authority, that there is not any of these lawgivers, these delineators of the religion of nature, whose system is not erected upon suppositions absolutely false and uncorrespondent with that *true* nature and those *real* circumstances of things, from whence alone the duty of man can be truly deduced. For,

1. ALL of them proceed upon the supposition that the nature of man is now in its original perfection.

2. THEY suppose GOD to bear no other relation to man than that of a creator, a conservator, and a rewarder or a punisher.

3. THEY maintain future happiness to be the natural consequence of virtuous action.

Now the true state of man, with regard to all these particulars, cannot be discovered from any the most subtle abstract reasonings upon it, nor even from any actual survey of man's nature which it is in our power to take. Perfectly known unto GOD only are all his works from the beginning. The history alone which he
himself

himself hath published can apprize us of the true original and present condition of mankind: And this history will inform us that man, at first created in the image of the triune God, hath undergone, thro' his own transgression, a dreadful shock, a defilement, a falling off from God, whereby he became odious to him who is of purer eyes than to behold impurity, and fell into a state of captivity to sin and death, and the evil spirit the great adversary of mankind, whose malevolence had contrived to bring him into this wretched state. That in order to our being redeemed from this dreadful slavery, so as to become again partakers of that love and blessing of God which we had lost, it was, in the nature of things, necessary that the sinful corruption of our nature should be expiated, by the suffering of the Son of God invested in that nature, and then consecrating it by carrying it up into heaven as a first fruit of the harvest, the resurrection of the redeemed; and in the mean time, sanctifying and purifying it by the continual, energetic operation of the holy spirit of the GODHEAD, thro' a lively faith in this Redeemer. The same history will inform us that he who alone knew the need of this twofold remedy, did mercifully provide it for mankind, and inform them of the means whereby they might avail themselves of this gracious process, even by a living, an active, an obedient faith, trust, confidence in the powerful mediation of the Redeemer.

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Now if this be the real state of man, if this be the constitution of those things which relate to him, this the relation which he standeth in to God; will there not, in all fitness and propriety, arise from such a state and constitution, a certain course of duty altogether different from that which would be suggested by the state in which natural religion placeth him? How offensively must *he* offer up his prayers to God, who knoweth nothing of the one mediator between God and man? How preposterously must *he* expect eternal happiness, who is not aware that this happiness is by no means the natural consequences of any actions which we may stile virtuous, but merely the gift of God thro' faith in Jesus Christ! How vainly will *he* pretend to love his fellow-creatures, who doth not acknowledge, what God's word hath taught, that love is an absolute stranger to every breast, 'till God, who is love, vouchsafe to teach it by his holy spirit; and that he only hath that love which is "the fulfilling of the law," who by faith in the Redeemer, is born of God? How wide will be *his* notion of the nature of that God whom he pretendeth to worship, and consequently how far will he be from worshipping him in truth, who knoweth not in him the important characters of the son, the redeemer, of the holy spirit, the sanctifier! Untaught to address him in those relations under which, his help is so seasonably offered to our wants, his love so abundantly recommended to our thankfulness!

ness! And lastly, how much more highly must *he* think of himself than he ought to think, who doth not suspect himself to be a fallen, lost creature, offensive to God his creator, incapable, of himself, of doing any thing that is pleasing to him, naturally an heir of eternal destruction, and capable of being accepted and raised to glory, only in the beloved son, who hath won the father to be propitious to the sinful, miserable race of mankind, even to as many as believe on his name.

THESE reflections do, I trust, demonstrate that there is not only a difference but an opposition between the fitnesses of action suggested by the gospel, the true religion of man's nature, and by that which many writers, on their own authority, have called by that name: and that we may as reasonably assert that one and the same regimen is fit and congruous for him who laboureth under a dangerous sickness, and for him who is in perfect health, as that one and the same religious procedure is fit for men who are supposed to be as perfect as their fancied rank in a certain new-invented scale of beings will permit, and for those who lie under the sentence of God's vengeance, and can be saved from it only by the efficacious medicine of obedient faith in the great Redeemer.

LET reason then, or, to speak accurately, let fancy acquit herself ever so happily in planning out a system of human duty; yet if she have not, for this purpose, considered the true state

state of man; if she suppose him to be in a condition the very reverse of that in which, in fact, he findeth himself: if she have overlooked many important, essential circumstances of man's nature; the ingenious system will not, after all, have delineated the true religion or duty of the being for which it was calculated, any more than the ingenious solar system of *Descartes* hath set forth the real laws by which the motions of the planets are conducted.

THE present condition of man, is the consequence of an early transaction, which could be known to us only by information; and when it is known, no reasonings of our own can help us to the knowledge of those other particulars, the clear view whereof can alone direct us to that course of action which is fit and congruous for beings so circumstanced, in order to their eternal happiness.

AND it is in compassion to our blindness and ignorance, that the same tender love of God to man which prompted him to give his only son for our salvation, hath afforded us in his holy word, a full intimation of what we are, from what glory fallen, to what glory recoverable, thro' the meritorious atchievement of our blessed Redeemer; and also, what is the process, the system of duty (resulting, no doubt, from the highest fitness) by which we may avail ourselves of the united efforts of the glorious trinity in our behalf.

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To his law then, and to his testimony let us betake ourselves for enquiring what is the true duty of man, not to the visionary systems of poreblind philosophers who arrogantly say, "we see," and yet stumble at the very threshold of morality; wilfully ignorant of the most important circumstances which belong to man the subject, and to God the object of that religion which they affect so pompously to detail. Ignorant of what the sacred volume, from first to last inculcateth, that the great concern of the God of love for the race of mankind is to redeem it from that destructive slavery to the powers of darkness, into which it is fallen, and to save it from the consequent, eternal misery which naturally awaiteth it; — that the Son of God, who came down from heaven on this gracious errand, is therefore stiled, throughout the holy scriptures, the SAVIOUR and the REDEEMER, and that the eternal life which he hath purchased for true believers hath, therefore, in the same holy scriptures obtained the names, unthought of by natural religionists, the names of SALVATION and REDEMPTION: ignorant also, that there is no other way of obtaining salvation, the free gift of God thro' Jesus Christ, but by receiving his word with meekness, and simplicity, and lowliness of heart, and by a steady purpose "to observe all things whatsoever he," by himself or by his holy church, established by his apostles on his own plan, "hath commanded us:" — that they who thus

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believe in him, shall receive that holy spirit which, dwelling in them, shall vitally unite them as members, to him, the head of his church, and enable them to bring forth those fruits of virtue and holiness whose end is everlasting life:—that without this spirit of Christ it is impossible for man, (however magnificently we may talk of the beauty, and fitness, and eternal, unchangeable obligation of virtue, and of the power of reason to enforce obedience to it, it is impossible for man) to do any thing that is good or acceptable to God; and that if we are saved thro' faith, it is purely of his grace and favour; “not of works, lest any man should glory;” for, that true christians, and they alone, are able to exercise virtue, merely because they are “the new workmanship of God, anew created by him in Christ Jesus unto good works, that all their excellence might be to the praise of his glory.” Ignorant of all these essential truths, the philosophic preacher of morality is engaged in fruitless attempts to produce the effect without its necessary cause. He recommendeth moral virtue as the means of everlasting happiness, without referring us to that faith in the Redeemer which is the genuine, the only source of virtue; vainly exhorting us to ascend to heaven, without directing us to Jesus Christ, the ladder on which, according to his own interpretation of the patriarch's dream, “the angels of God, trained up on earth to glory, must

a John i. 51. = Gen. xxviii. 12.

ascend thither ; and holding out a few powerful motives and persuasions to a morality, which perhaps after all, may ill accord with that of the gospel, instead of animating us to seek, by the means which he hath appointed in his church, that holy spirit, whereby alone we may be “ sealed unto the day of redemption,” and rendered fruitful in every good work which can make us acceptable to God and approved of men.

THRO’ such a philosophy beware lest any man plunder you of the rich mercies of God in Christ Jesus, whether ye be commissioned preachers of the word of life, or professed hearers of it. Flourish that philosophy, the nurse of useful arts, the source of social comforts, the faithful guide, the strengthner of the intellectual powers, the opener of the wonders of God’s creation ! that philosophy which is founded upon *real* demonstration, and incontestable truth, and well-applied experience ; but let it not be called philosophy, or if learned fashion will needs insist upon that name for it, let it at least be owned to be a philosophy after the tradition of men, and not after Christ, to renounce the fair light of heaven, and to plunge into the darkness of the heathen state that we may haply feel out and find, what the shrewdest wits of antiquity so unsuccessfully attempted, the nature of God, and the true condition of man ; when God hath illustriously displayed them both, by express communications. The result of the ut-

most effort of *Athenian* philosophy upon the former of these subjects, was to erect an image of gold, or silver, or stone, the sculpture of human ingenuity, and to inscribe their altar to the unknown God. The result of the researches of modern philosophy professing to know God, are pretended demonstrations of his being and attributes; and yet, while these demonstrations consider him only as a supreme being, a deity, a first cause, without attending to those attributes which belong to every person of his Godhead, the Creator, the Redeemer, the Sanctifier, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; while he whom they would demonstrate is not set forth as the triune God, in vain will they pretend to have demonstrated that nature or those attributes which, according to his own express declaration, do essentially belong to him. He who rejecteth the Son and the Holy Spirit, this man, however he may acknowledge the God of these philosophers, "hath not the Father."

IN a word, since the true light now shineth, since the sacred volume is, indeed, the word of God, let the acknowledged decisiveness of that authority demonstrate, as well the vanity of those boasted demonstrations of a God, which could with no propriety be offered to the world but upon the supposition of its being in a state of heathenism, as the absurdity of those curious disquisitions in which the philosophic religion of nature hath so earnestly engaged our times,

concerning the "criterion of virtue," its "motive," its "obligation," and its "future reward." How needless will all these enquiries, how wide of truth will the most elaborate result of them, appear to be to those, who are taught by the word of God, that his good spirit, which alone can enable us to do any thing that is virtuous, is ever ready to work in us every virtue that can adorn our souls or promote social happiness: that nothing can procure for us this fruitful, heavenly gift but affiance in the name of the only begotten Son of God: and that they only, who truly believe, looking up to him as their only possible Saviour from sin and the torments of everlasting death, and adhering with purpose of heart to his holy, efficacious injunctions, they only shall not perish but have everlasting life.

The E N D.

